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Invited by the State: Institutionalizing Volunteer Subjectivity in Contemporary Japan

Akihiro OGAWA

Abstract

This paper is an ethnographic study of volunteerism and the emergence of nonprofit organizations (NPOs) in Japanese society, which have been proliferating since the passage of the Law to Promote Specified Nonprofit Activities (NPO Law) in 1998. I document a transition that Japanese society, at a grassroots level, has undergone since this law allowed thousands of civic groups to be acknowledged as proactive participants in Japanese social and political life. My research analyzes the dynamic micro-politics of everyday interactions between the state and the individual in the ongoing activities of an NPO. It especially focuses on how different levels in the Japanese government shape these civil-society organizations into a structure that supports the state’s goals, and how people at the grassroots level respond to the state’s actions. My argument is that the state plays a significant role in generating volunteer subjects who support the NPO activities — a process of the institutionalization of volunteer subjectivity by the state. I present what voluntary NPO participants at the grassroots level experience amidst the macro-political process of institutionalization of volunteer subjectivity: how they interpret this process and weave it into their daily lives to create a social consciousness and identity.

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Chobora — You can volunteer with a single finger!

A man finds trash on the road, and goes to pick it up:

A: “Oh, trash.”
Narration: “Nice chobora!”
A: “What’s that? Cho...”
Narration: “Chobora... You did a little volunteering. We now call it chobora.”

A person in a wheelchair is at a loss in an elevator hall since the button is in an awkward position. Another person briskly moves towards the elevator and pushes the button.

Woman in wheelchair: “Thank you.”
Narration: “Why don’t you start chobora? You can volunteer with a single finger...”

These were vignettes from a nationwide television commercial that aired in 2001 when I was doing fieldwork in an urban Tokyo neighborhood. The sponsor was the Japan Advertising Council, known as AC, a public-interest corporation that promotes serving the common good through public service campaigns. The novel term chobora, which is a combination of the Japanese word for “a little” (cho) and “volunteering” (bora: the front part of the English loan word boranita, “volunteer”) has permeated the thoughts and behavior of Japanese people.

In this paper, I argue that such Foucauldian, coercive subjectivity — what I call volunteer subjectivity — is being intentionally produced and reproduced under the name of voluntarism in contemporary Japanese society. The process of promoting this volunteer subjectivity, which has pierced the very basis of consciousness, is resulting in the institutionalization of a new relationship between the state and the individual. During the course of ethnographic fieldwork from September 2001 through April 2003, intensively focusing on voluntarism stemming from the 1998 Law to Promote Specified Nonprofit Activities (NPO Law), I looked at the mobilization of volunteer subjects in Japanese society, and I gradually came to realize that the agent is surely the state. The Japanese government at various levels plays a significant role in mobilizing these volunteer subjects. At the practical level, the municipal government invites residents to become volunteers to provide specific social services in the local community such as in continuing education program planning in the community where I did fieldwork, museum operation, and elderly-care services. The government then organizes the residents into volunteer organizations called nonprofit organizations (NPOs) under the 1998 NPO Law.

The motivation for this is not simply to augment social services offered by the state. I found that the volunteer activities organized under NPOs actually replace the government’s provision of these services. The primary purpose of this NPO policy is cutting cost in public administration, a key agenda in globally dominant neoliberal politics. Meanwhile, the volunteer subjectivity that supports NPO activities has been systematically produced and reproduced. The Education Ministry has been trying to revise the Fundamental Law of Education, a basic charter defining the direction of state-supervised education, in order to situate boranita, volunteering, as one of the core courses in the Japanese school system. It aims to generate a subjectivity focused towards civic engagement, in which people can spontaneously participate in problem-solving processes in public affairs.

I started this fieldwork with these key questions: Why have Japanese recently been hearing the term “boranita” so often? Who actually sets up this emerging discourse of boranita? What exactly happens in voluntarism under the NPO Law? It seems to me that such actions as portrayed in the vignette could practically be termed as everyday kindness, but I began to observe that acts such as these were now consciously being labeled as boranita. In fact, even though no Western, Judeo-Christian tradition is deeply rooted among its people, Japanese society is not a complete stranger to the concept of voluntarism. Japan has a tradition of neighbors helping each other, symbolized by the term otogaisama (for each other), which represents a sensitivity to mutual aid. Japanese society has such a set of rules for daily life, rooted in the local community. Its members have traditionally forged close ties based on mutual aid. One typical example was the form of cooperative labor known as yui (literally, tying) through which community members would help each other plant and harvest fields, rebuild homes, thatch roofs, and engage in other activities that could best be done by a group (Hoshino 2000). In today’s society as well, if one of their neighbors is having a funeral, Japanese go along to help out; in areas with heavy snowfall, neighbors of households without able-bodied adults willingly help with snow shoveling. In every case, helpers accept no payment because members of the local community help and support each other, as part of the spirit of otogaisama. Thus, why is contemporary Japanese society now intentionally choosing to define
activities that are not particularly noteworthy, such as picking up trash and pushing an elevator button, as volunteering? Who is participating in this new social trend? What are ordinary people experiencing and what do they think of this phenomenon? In this paper, I explore the implication of this emerging form of volunteerism.

Discourses of “Borantia”

In a popular vocabulary encyclopedia (Gendai yōgo no kiso chishiki), the word borantia first appeared in the 1960 volume. However, at that point it was only explained in the foreign loan words section, as referring to a volunteer soldier in the military. In 1968, the meaning was expanded into a conventional social welfare term, with both of these definitions continuing to be in use today. In 1979, the word borantia was first introduced as a way to participate in society, particularly for women. The encyclopedia explained that borantia is a sort of spirit, whereby the residents of a community have a consciousness as members of society to spontaneously participate in social and political life, and make voluntary efforts for the common good. The embodiment of this spirit is called “volunteer activity,” the definition explained. Beyond social welfare, the term borantia is now recognized as applying to a wide range of spontaneous activities in social and political life. Interestingly, Ichikawa Fusae, one of the first Dietwomen in Japan’s postwar politics to advocate the improvements of women’s status, wrote the explanation. She was a leader in the women’s suffrage league, and played a significant role in obtaining women’s suffrage in Japan. Currently the vocabulary encyclopedia has expanded the itemization of the word borantia to more than twenty definitions.

The above explanation describes the popular discourse of volunteerism. From Japanese academia, meanwhile, Kaneko Ikuo (1992) sets forth a new meaning of volunteering in contemporary Japan, introducing the key word tsunagari or networking. Volunteerism, he writes, represents a relationality in society — when a person sees that other people face problems, he/she tries to solve the problems jointly with those people. Kaneko argues that tsunagari generated from volunteer activities makes society diversified and enriched. Volunteerism is a principle of behavior for people who want to find new perspectives and senses of value. It could even be a window for seeing beyond the deadlocked situation of society, he writes (Kaneko 1992: 69).

I believe that there are two possible answers as to why volunteering is in such vogue in Japan at present. The general perception of emerging borantia took root in the wake of the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake that devastated Hyogo and Osaka Prefectures in western Japan on January 17, 1995, and claimed 6,401 lives. A total of 1,377,300 people joined volunteer activities from January 1995 through January 1996 from all over Japan, dedicating themselves to rescue and reconstructive work (Economic Planning Agency 2000: 7). Faced with the sudden emergence of a huge number of volunteers in 1995, some members of the mass media called this “The First Year of Volunteerism.” Many Japan-based scholars, primarily sociologists, did extensive research on the impact of the post-Hanshin volunteering on political, economic, and social institutions. Their work pointed out the inability of traditional government bureaucracy to deal with the tragic aftermath of the earthquake, in contrast to the impressive work done by the volunteers, and dramatized the need for a social and political structure that recognizes the valuable contributions of volunteer-based civic groups and NPOs to society. Furthermore, they argued that the earthquake changed the way that people at the “grassroots” level comprehended the meaning and reality of society.

Aside from the earthquake and the massive response from volunteers that it evoked, the emergence of volunteers in Japan may reflect a convergence of domestic and global developments. Lester Salamon (1994) argues that the development of volunteerism is indicative of a global associational revolution, a movement characterized by a massive array of self-governing, voluntary, private organizations pursuing public purposes outside the formal apparatus of the state. This expansion of associational groups could permanently alter the relationship between states and citizens, Salamon argues. Think-tank specialists see the ongoing proliferation of volunteerism as evidence of Japan’s evolving “civil society,” a term that refers to more direct participation by the citizenry in addressing social needs (Yamamoto 1996). This was the eventual result of Japanese postwar economic prosperity, which generated a sizable urban middle-class (Ibid.: 10–11). Furthermore, the protracted malaise of the Japanese economy since the 1990s challenged the validity of the ideals of material achievement that shaped Japan in the decades after World War II. The system of lifetime employment, once the pride of Japan’s companies, was showing cracks. In this increasingly uncertain environment, getting a job with a company no longer meant the guarantee of a stable future. Rather, people in Japan began shifting their priorities
to pursue something they could truly support. In this context, volunteerism gave ordinary people a chance to strategically choose to develop meaning in their lives, described by Nakano as a lifestyle choice for establishing self-identities (Nakano 2000). Volunteering was advocated as a conscious self-motivated action for enriching one's life amidst socioeconomic uncertainty.

But these explanations do not seem sufficient. They do not answer some of my original questions: Who has defined the macro-discourse of volunteering in Japanese society? Who has defined one particular activity as appropriate and desirable and called it "volunteering"? Who actually benefits from this emerging phenomenon of volunteering? In order to answer these questions, allow me to introduce a volunteer mobilization project by the state — a municipal government — that I observed and experienced.

Volunteers Invited by the Government

Ms. Tajima, a housewife in her fifties, was an active woman in the local community, playing key roles in the women's section of the neighborhood association and in her daughters' school PTA, as well as in organizing a summer camp for children. After finishing child rearing some ten years ago, Ms. Tajima started looking for "something new in life." One day an advertisement in a local newspaper caught her eye. The advertisement was recruiting on behalf of a woman's group for an international exchange program. The group, which was affiliated with the municipal government, planned to visit Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Ms. Tajima had a strong interest in the music of Eastern Europe, which motivated her to apply, although she told me that she did not exactly understand the purpose of the mission. Ms. Tajima thought that she deserved to apply for the mission in light of her contribution to the community as a neighborhood association and PTA member. She wrote an essay entitled "Challenge to the Unknown World," mentioning her rich experiences in the community and her own interest in exploring something new in her life. She was then chosen as a member of the delegation to Eastern Europe. This was her first involvement with the government.

In May 1994, Ms. Tajima received a call from a municipal government official asking for her help after she returned from the three-week international exchange mission. The call was from a director of a newly created public facility for promoting continuing education in the municipality. The director asked for her to become a volunteer in curriculum planning and operation of the facility. She describes her impression of the call:

For a long time, I was a traditional Japanese housewife — ryōsei-kenbo ("good wife and wise mother"). I graduated from a private girl's school — from its junior high through college — one famous for ryōsei-kenbo education. I served and still serve my husband, and I fully took care of my two daughters. As my hobby, I enjoyed baking cakes. I was fully satisfied when my family enjoyed my homemade cakes. But on the other hand, I wanted to start something new while my mother-in-law [who lives in her household] was still healthy. Someday I will have to take care of her. When I was thinking about the rest of my life, I thought, "I want to be more involved with society." Actually, at that time, I have to admit that I was looking for a place I could go. When I got the call from the municipal government officer, I thought this was maybe a last chance to explore another road in my life. I thought I would participate in the community more and more. The director expected me to play such an important role in the community, right? The call really confirmed my reason for being in this community. Thus, I decided to accept the offer from the government and join the continuing education project for the community as a volunteer. I really have enjoyed volunteering here. However, I never imagined that I would be involved in promoting continuing education in such an active manner. That was new territory for me.

Around the same time, Mr. Koba, another person I interviewed in my research, was also asked for his help by the director of continuing education policy in the municipal government. He was a leader of a neighborhood association in his community and was appointed as a member of a task force to promote administrative reform in the municipal government. He talked to me about why he became involved in this volunteering activity:

When I was a leader of my neighborhood association nearly ten years ago, I came to know Ms. Saeki, director of continuing education policy at the municipal government. At that time, she was in the community development division. I was directly asked by her to help this community-oriented continuing education project. I was never reluctant to do it. As a disposition shared by us in downtown Tokyo, if somebody we know well wants to do something but needs help, we gladly help out. That follows our feeling of oigaitasama.

When he talked to me about this, it seemed that he was very proud of this story. This was partly because this episode revealed that he had a relationship with a high-ranking official in the municipal government.
Furthermore, the direct call for help verified that the government trusted him. The government, frankly, tickled his pride.

The municipal government also publicly recruited people who spontaneously responded to their request for volunteers for the project. Everywhere in the community, including public libraries, hospitals, banks, subway stations, and the municipal government head office along with its branches, there appeared B-5-size notices. These notices, undecorated and written in black ink on blue paper, had a simple message:

"Why don’t you join us?" The municipal government is now recruiting volunteers to do planning and operations for education activities at a newly created continuing education center in the community. The center opens this coming December. The only requirement for eligibility is to be a resident or worker in the municipality.

The notice impressively ended with a couple of poem-like sentences:

You Can Do Something!
You Might Want To Do Something!
Why Don’t You Step Into A New Life?
You Can Start Through This Volunteer Activity.

I examined the government’s internal documents on this volunteer-mobilization project, which demonstrated the justification for organizing local residents as volunteers to implement continuing education policy. Under the Japanese Social Education Law, local governments at the prefecture and municipal levels are required to take full responsibility for offering continuing education to residents. A paper entitled “On Learning Activities and Volunteering” is one of the few documents available mentioning the vision of the municipal government for this project:

The basic principle ... of the continuing education policy ... should be self-learning by residents themselves. The learning activities should be operated through the residents’ spontaneous will. However, such opportunity for learning should be strategically arranged and intentionally organized by the municipal government. In this project, the residents can be both students and teachers. They can learn from each other. The residents are expected to not only acquire new knowledge and skills but also to enhance themselves and improve the quality of their lives through involvement in this project. Thus, the proposed project of continuing education can be “hand-made” by the volunteer-residents.

The paper further argues that

Continuing education is a positive learning activity in a community, one where independent residents build their own learning promotion system and provide learning opportunities for the residents. That is, continuing education is independent, self-directed volunteering activities by the residents themselves.

While building this policy, the main concern of the government was that of who could be mobilized for this community-oriented continuing education project. The government actually pointed to the residents’ mobilization for this project as the highest priority. The government indeed needed to open the volunteering opportunity to the public. However, in order to maintain a level of control, they decided to issue select invitations to volunteer. In fact, there were a number of seats to be filled by some chosen people. These chosen people were all highly educated; most had college degrees and high profiles in their local communities. By sharing the vision of the project, such invited volunteers were strongly expected to play significant roles in operating the project, instead of the municipal government itself.

By the opening of the continuing education center, 47 residents, including 34 invited volunteers like Ms. Tajima and Mr. Koba, had responded to the government’s recruitment. There were 13 purely voluntary participants. In total, there were 32 women and 15 men. Among the 34 invited people, all directly appointed by the government, were former teachers from a university, a high school, and an elementary school, women who had participated in the government-sponsored international exchange program, leaders of the neighborhood association, community development workers, PTA leaders, Red Cross volunteers, local NGO practitioners, consumers’ cooperative members, local cultural association leaders, local physical education association leaders, and local women’s center leaders. The municipal government organized all of the 47 volunteers into a citizens’ group, which would be finally reorganized as an NPO, for promoting continuing education in the local community. The 34 invited volunteers were, as planned, assigned to central positions in the project, such as planning continuing education courses in literature, foreign languages, pottery, and calligraphy, for example, and publishing a newsletter on continuing education activities in the community. The other voluntary participants were expected to help the invited volunteers.

This deliberate distinction of volunteers’ roles created by the municipal government resulted in lasting frustration among the purely voluntary volunteers. Despite this, the number of people who voluntarily joined this continuing education project increased year by year. When I
was doing my fieldwork, the number of volunteers amounted to more than 100. However, the invited volunteers continuously tried to influence all things regarding the operation, feeling some sense of duty to do so since they were directly asked by the government. They sustained a solid belief that what they were doing was fully supported by the government. “I don’t want to fail,” Ms. Tajima often said to me when I asked her why she was working so eagerly. It was like a duty and a regular job. The only difference was that she was not being paid, and what she was doing was termed _borantia._

**Volunteering as Potential for Individualization?**

Throughout my fieldwork, I was very surprised by one point shared by almost all of the volunteers. It was their answers to my very simple questions — “Why are you volunteering here? Why did you choose volunteering for promoting continuing education?” Answers were never on the tips of their tongues. The 34 invited volunteers could simply say that they were asked to volunteer. However, more than 100 people who eventually registered as pure volunteers generally seemed to have no particular reasons for volunteering in activities specifically related to promoting continuing education. Why did they choose this particular type of volunteering activity for supporting continuing education? Why did they not choose another kind of volunteering? Each of them gave their own particular reasons for volunteering.

Mr. Iwata, a businessman in his early thirties, told me that meeting people was his motivation:

> I am not from this area. I wanted to meet local people. I often have to move due to my job. For the past seven years, I have moved eleven times. However, I never had a chance to meet local people in these places. Now I have met many, many people. That is one of the main reasons I am volunteering here.

Mr. Matsuda, a college professor in his forties, talked to me in the same way about why he joined this activity:

> I wanted to be involved in my community more. I moved here three years ago. I bought a house. However, I didn’t know anybody in this community. Therefore, volunteering here is a precious chance to get to know people.

Along the same lines, Mr. Takahashi, the oldest volunteer in his seventies, formerly a toy factory owner, said:

> I am volunteering here for networking in case of an emergency. Think about the possibility of a huge earthquake happening here in downtown Tokyo. In that case, we need to know each other to survive the disaster by helping each other. Volunteering here offers me a chance to know who is who in the community.

Ms. Hayashi, in her late forties, also told me why she was volunteering:

> I took advantage of this volunteering opportunity for my career development. Many years ago, I wanted to be a writer. Instead, I got married, and had two kids. I did not have enough time. About five years ago I saw an advertisement for recruiting some volunteer writers for a newsletter informing people about continuing education opportunities in the local community. I wanted to learn how to write articles professionally. Fortunately, there were some professional editors the municipal government hired. I learned a lot from them. Actually, the editors even helped me make a network for publishing. Through the network, now I earn money by writing some short articles. It is a great achievement for me even if the articles are short.

Indeed, as earlier noted, most of the volunteers did not specifically seek volunteering opportunities with continuing education. Rather, they were looking for something to satisfy their own individual needs. These volunteers have their own reasons for wanting to engage in volunteer service, which was, by chance, promoting continuing education in the local community; an opportunity prepared by the municipal government.

Nakano (1999) discusses the phenomenon of volunteering by introducing the idea of individualization or self-actualization. “Who am I? What do I want to do? What can I do? In what way shall I construct my identity?” Melucci (1989) points out that in contemporary society individualization is realized in the context of a reflexively ordered environment. In fact, the process of individualization requires a self-reflexive form of action. Our life-political environment is not a one-dimensional hierarchical power structure. It is expressed by multiple values generated by affluent information resources and reinforced by social conflicts. Such an environment makes it possible for us to negotiate and intentionally choose another identity, a reflexive production of self in the life-political arenas from which social identities are constructed. No fixed identities are confirmed. Conventional social divisions, by means of which membership in class, family, gender, or nation-state are defined, are now becoming increasingly flexible and their boundary lines are becoming
more diffused. New kinds of social identities are connoted by such figurations as “nomads of the present.” The volunteers in my field site abstractly expressed what they might want to do, or said that they simply wanted to do something in general. The vehicle for volunteering did not matter much. While these people were looking for something, the municipal government offered a place for volunteering in a timely manner. People happened to encounter chances for volunteer work in the area of continuing education. They justified the situation by saying that they encountered what they were looking for, and then they realized that they finally found new meaning in their lives.

Actually, I myself experienced this. I did not have a strong interest in volunteering. I had never had a volunteer experience in my life prior to starting this project. However, I had thought that if I had the chance, I wanted to be involved in society as a volunteer; I believed that my involvement could contribute positively to society. I had no idea, though, about what kind of volunteering activities I wanted to engage in. One day I happened to help a children’s class as a volunteer because the assigned volunteer had suddenly become sick. That day I wrote in my fieldnotes what I felt:

Today I helped in a course for kids as a volunteer. As part of the coursework, kids made their own illustrated books — writing stories, drawing pictures, and binding the pages. There were about 20 kids in the course. Today was the final session. We volunteers helped in the bookbinding process. I had several conversations with the kids. One young girl told me while I helped her, “I wanted this book to be a present to myself. Actually, September 1 is my birthday. I really enjoyed this course. I want to take a course like this again.” Another child told me, “I have come to this (continuing education) center since I was in my first year of elementary school. I took many fine arts courses here. I like these courses.” I felt a feeling of satisfaction and happiness when I heard such comments from the kids. Probably the feeling I felt was a kind of joy in being a volunteer. The volunteers who find meaning in doing volunteer work here must have this type of feeling I felt today.

I was never interested in children’s courses, or in promoting continuing education activities. However, from the bottom of my heart, I was very much moved by my own first “volunteer” experience. I felt joy run through my body and mind. I even thought that I found a new aspect of myself. At the same time, however, I thought that this feeling could be dangerous. Somebody, including an authority like the government, could take advantage of this kind of feeling for achieving its own purposes, while mobilizing people under the beautiful name of “volunteerism.” In fact, Melucci warns of the possibility that the process of individualization faces a sort of blockade when we abandon the serious self-reflexive form of action and blindly believe in existing power. In such cases, one falls into dependence on authority. He writes, “the process of individualization involves on the one hand, the potential for individual control over the conditions and levels of action; yet, on the other, it entails the expropriation of these self-reflexive and self-productive resources by society itself” (1989: 48; also cited by Nakano, 1999: 85). Given volunteer opportunities by the government, people simply felt joy as a part of self-actualization while they were volunteering. They wanted to repeat the same experience again, as I did. We only considered the pure feeling that we were helping, bettering society.

However, all of us were, on another level, only reacting to the government’s appeal. This meant that volunteers subconsciously became enablers of the system, not fully aware that they were recruited and manipulated by the government into becoming a part of the existing social structure in order to compensate for the government’s insufficiencies. While mobilizing the local residents as volunteers, the fiscally ailing municipal government actually shrank its staff in its continuing education division. It abolished the position of director of continuing education policy under the name of administrative structural reform in 2000, the year that my field site gained NPO status. It occurred to me that the government could conveniently mobilize people as volunteers, particularly if the ideas of the volunteer recruits were naïve.

**Reproduction of Volunteer Subjectivity through Education**

Even though volunteering is part of self-individualization, examples of continuing education volunteers in my fieldwork verify that it is quite controllable by others. In the process of education reform, the Japanese government has been making serious efforts to institutionalize the expression of voluntary will in the existing society in an effective, strategic manner (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology 2002). At a practical level, the institutionalization of volunteer subjectivity is encouraged through the national education program. In Japan, the Education Ministry strictly supervises the content of education. Through education as a national project, such subjectivity is recognized as important and ideal for society, and justified as a desirable social identity for
supporting the currently existing society. In particular, students are expected to absorb volunteer subjectivity as something necessary for good citizenship. In contemporary discourse, the volunteer subjectivity organized under NPOs is even expected to revive the deadlocked economy and society, as Japan lost direction after the burst of the asset-inflated "bubble" economy of the late 1980s through the early 1990s.

On March 20, 2003, the Japanese government received an epoch-making proposal, one that aimed to revise the Fundamental Law of Education, from the Central Council for Education, an authoritative advisory body to the Education Minister. The education law has defined the basic concept of the Japanese educational system since 1947, controlled textbook content and defined the daily school regimen as its guiding principles. Based on reflections of Japan’s nationalistic education before and during World War II and with the aim of building a democratic and peaceful society, the concept of individualism has been prominent in Japanese educational philosophy. Actually, the law, which is often dubbed an "education constitution," is the only law among several fundamental laws enacted during the Allied Forces’ occupation after World War II that has not yet been revised, although some politicians have tried. The latest attempt to revise the law was initiated in November 2001 by the Education Minister at the time, Toyama Atsuko. Minister Toyama told the council that a study of revisions to the law was necessary to deal with "changes we are facing" by nurturing creativity and fostering respect for tradition and culture — “qualities,” she said, that are required for the nation’s citizens (Asahi Shimbun November 27, 2001).

In this groundbreaking proposal by the Central Council for Education, the key slogan of education called for an agenda toward education in the new millennium — “the nurturing of spiritually rich and strong Japanese people who will generate new ground for the 21st century.” More specific to the revisions, the proposal recommended that seven principles be added to the current Fundamental Law of Education:

1. Schools must be trusted by the public;
2. University reform is necessary to carry the nation into the knowledge-oriented era;
3. The role of families and coordination among schools, families, and local authorities is important in educational matters;
4. A sense of civic responsibility for proactively participating in public must be cultivated;
5. There should be respect for Japanese culture, and the development of a love for community and patriotism;
6. Lifelong learning must be promoted;
7. The basic program to promote education must be modified.

(Central Council for Education 2003)

The proposal promotes the cultivation of a sense of civic responsibility, while maintaining an underlying tone of patriotic emphasis on nationalistic identity formation. This idea stresses the importance of nurturing awareness and a positive attitude toward becoming actively involved in public forums supportive of the state and the individual.

Furthermore, in the proposal a new term, New Public (atarashii kōkō), is introduced, while the meaning of “public” has been tactically reconceptualized. In Japanese society, “public” has usually meant the state or something related to the state. However, this new statement is redefining the public sphere by institutionalizing volunteer subjectivity. The concept of public has been expanded. It includes an area of civic engagement for supporting a New Public. It is a sphere in which people in general or people who are interested in a cause can voluntarily participate. The proposal aims to establish a foundation of solidarity for good citizens to promote a better society, defined as increased civic engagement, which in itself would help society, the argument goes, to become less subject to the whims of government:

The creation of a New Public … aims to encourage the proactive participation of volunteers for the state and society in the 21st century…. It is the responsibility of people living in a democratic country to be proactively involved in matters of the state and society. The situation of the state and society depends on the people’s will to seek something better. However, so far, we Japanese have tended to depend on somebody else’s action regarding these issues. We believe it is someone else’s responsibility. But that is not good. Instead, we need to cultivate a sense of public awareness. Through the volunteers’ work just after the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake, we confirmed that we have a tradition of mutual aid. Now we are stepping into a new era in which we are supporting a sense of values that we now call a New Public. That is, we try to solve the social problems we face by ourselves, including life improvement issues in the daily lives of the local community as well as matters of the global environment and human rights. It is expected that one will try to use one’s abilities and time for others, for the local community, and for society, based on one’s own will. For supporting a New Public, what one needs is self-awareness as an active participant in the making of state and society, bravery for practicing
social justice, and an attitude of respect for Japanese traditional social norms.

(Central Council for Education 2003)

Here, in other words, in the *New Public* sphere, Japanese people are expected to spontaneously do what they feel they need to do by themselves, instead of waiting for something to be provided by the government. That, in theory, is the civic engagement that the Education Ministry expects to institutionalize as volunteer subjectivity.

A reality in Japan is that volunteering often sounds like it is mandatory. In the educational philosophy promulgated by the Central Council for Education, volunteering to support the *New Public* is expected to officially be established in school education as something compulsory. In fact, the council recommended introducing volunteerism as a part of the core curriculum, such as in moral education (*dōoku*) and social studies courses. In another proposal on volunteer promotion by the Central Council for Education, its basic stance on promoting volunteerism is that

> [Volunteering should be considered a key for solving social problems we are now facing. Volunteering provides an opportunity for the social participation of independent, autonomous individuals. Such individuals are expected to contribute to generating and supporting the new “public.”] \(^6\) In other words, learning volunteering plays a dominant role in supporting the concept of the “public.” It will become crucial to support a rich civil society.

(Central Council for Education 2002)

In a further example, the proposal mentions how to introduce volunteering to children in elementary, secondary and college levels:

For youth in the growth phase, both schools and local communities should intentionally and strategically introduce volunteer activities. Considering their educational value, we urge youth to have various kinds of “direct” volunteer experiences.... Learning to volunteer provides an opportunity for spontaneous learning and activity, and generates people who are considerate. Volunteering will give students a chance to enhance the meaning of their lives throughout their lifetimes. Furthermore, doing so will create a solid foundation for becoming a spontaneous, independent person who can always contribute to society through everyday activities.

(Central Council for Education 2002)

In fact, the council urged students from elementary schools to universities to participate in volunteering, as these activities could be an important factor in high school and college admissions, and could be counted as credit. To generate real-life volunteer experience, it was reported that Waseda University, one of the most prestigious private universities in Tokyo, planned to dispatch its 250 students into elementary and junior high schools in the Shinjuku ward of central Tokyo as teaching assistants for computer science and club activities (*Nihon Keizai Shimbun* June 14, 2002). This is definitely becoming a trend in Japanese university education. Moreover, the council proposed establishing a “young volunteer passport” system, under which students who volunteer may be given discounts on entrance fees to public facilities (Central Council for Education 2002). This document would be a record of individual volunteer activities, and would apply toward school credit, entrance examinations and employment recruitment evaluations.

Some critics point out that forcing students to participate in volunteer activities and offering rewards as incentive distorts the original spirit of volunteerism. The *Asahi Shimbun* newspaper on April 9, 2002 said in an editorial:

> The important thing is not simply the number of hours put in. What counts is how one uses one’s physical and mental resources to learn, care and understand what it is like to help other people. Nor is helping out at nursing homes and similar institutions the only form of volunteer work. Active volunteerism involves identifying problems and working out solutions, as was the case for the young people who helped address the issue of HIV-tainted blood products, for example. Moreover, it ought to be more amply rewarded. One can gain joy when his action makes a difference, no matter how modest.

(Asahi Shimbun 2002)

It is indeed possible that “overnight volunteers” might suddenly become popular in schools because volunteers would receive merit points for their volunteer activities, which would be recorded in their teachers’ reports to schools to which they plan to apply. The meaning of “volunteer” will change if and when it becomes virtually compulsory in schools.

Interestingly enough, the proposal on volunteer promotion by the Central Council for Education (2002) never used the English-loan word *borantia* for its definition of “volunteering.” “Volunteering” was instead translated as *hōshi* in Japanese, which literally means “service” in English. The Japanese term – *hōshi* – actually has a nuance that implies supporting society or even sacrificing oneself for the public welfare. The proposal
justified the usage of the term hōshi because it correctly expressed the broad meaning of volunteering. It said:

Both hōshi and boranita commonly mean activities for someone else and society as a whole, providing time without expectation of material reward...What we pursue here is contribution to the New Public, which is supported by each individual providing his or her time and ability. That is, more specifically, we pursue activities for someone else as well as for oneself, and for society as a whole, not expecting any reward. In this sense, we broadly define these activities as hōshi. From this point of view, our traditional community services such as neighborhood associations, youth groups, firefighting, and festivals are all based on hōshi.

(Central Council for Education 2002)

However, I have never perceived that the volunteers in my field site see their activities as hōshi. They were actually very sensitive to the word hōshi and never used it for describing their activities. One volunteer said in a meeting,

I don't think that volunteerism is hōshi. We volunteers are not building a relationship between people who give services and people who receive services. We primarily try to enhance ourselves through volunteering. I believe that we are now in a transition from a money-based society to a heart-based society. Volunteering offers us a clue to the meaning in life. We are not doing it for others but doing it for ourselves and for our own lives.

Another said,

I believe that there is no ideal type of volunteering. Each organization or group has its own style. I think it is possible to have various styles of volunteering.

While listening to these opinions, I felt that the argument made by the Education Ministry in its macro-discourse is far from the reality of volunteering as actually practiced.

It seems contradictory that the government can ignore such reality at the grassroots, since education is situated as the first step for effectively making routine the creation of this coercive social consciousness (e.g., Illich 1972; Foucault 1977; Miller 2001). This occurs through forms of educational practice, which shape volunteering as supporting the New Public. Education controlled under the strong state defines an ideal style of civic engagement. It is a social engineering tool for determining identities, to be deployed for an ulterior purpose. Furthermore, in producing and reproducing a certain form of human nature — one directed by the urge of volunteer subjectivity — the national education system has impinged upon the population as a whole. The proposal points out how the government and businesses can introduce and support volunteering activities (Central Council for Education 2002). At the practical level, volunteering promotion centers, such as Tokyo Voluntary Action Center (TVAC), an administrative arm of the Tokyo Metropolitan Government specializing in promoting volunteerism, encourage people in Tokyo to participate in volunteer work. Social Welfare councils, quasi-government institutions designed to promote both the growth of volunteerism and the matching of existing community needs with volunteering resources, are nowadays being reorganized as volunteering promotion centers at prefecture and municipal levels. In the Tokyo metropolitan area, for example, there were 51 volunteer centers in April 2004. Volunteer centers like TVAC give information about volunteer opportunities while educating people who are interested in volunteering. What they are teaching, however, is not simply the virtues of volunteerism, but the social necessity of surrendering subjectivity to the volunteering impulse. According to a TVAC pamphlet, there are four pillars of volunteerism. They say volunteerism exhibits the following qualities: (1) spontaneity, (2) mutual aid, (3) unpaid service, and (4) problem solving.

Japanese society, as a result of such movements, has been experiencing a reformulation of the relations between the state and the individual. In fact, it is being introduced to a new form of rationality of the state aimed at the level of human consciousness. The volunteer subjectivity is becoming "the fictitious atom of an 'ideological' representation of society" defined by the specific technology of power that Foucault has called "discipline" (Foucault 1977: 194). Disciplinary power is insinuated in volunteer activities, penetrating regulation into the details of everyday life through procedures like examinations and systematic training. These constrain human consciousness — volunteer subjectivity — into collectively useful aptitudes. In fact, I noticed that the Japanese term boranita is never used for "negative" activism under the current system. Participating in, for example, anti-government activities, anti-globalization appeals, and the anti-Iraq War movement (to cite a recent case), has never been categorized as part of volunteer activities. The volunteer subjectivity is only praised for maintaining and strengthening the existing society. In this sense, if we replace the term New Public with "the state" in the council proposal, the meaning of volunteerism in Japan becomes clearer. That is, volunteerism is done for the state. Volunteer work is not to be used against
the state, even if the volunteer believes this activity would be for the good of the people. During my fieldwork, I had the impression that volunteers supervised under the NPO system would never become social activists. They are apolitical. In general, those people advocating thoughts different from the dominant political voice are labeled “people in citizens’ groups,” but not as “volunteers.” I found this distinction very conspicuous in media reports such as in newspapers.

The Colonization of the Volunteering World

As I argued earlier in this paper, volunteering is generally thought of as informal, unregulated, and spontaneous, as the word voluntary brings to mind. Volunteering is an expression of individuals’ values and their search for meaning in their lives. It is situated as part of the activities of the lifeworld, a term introduced by Edmund Husserl (1970). He describes the lifeworld as the world of immediate experience, the world as already there, predetermined, experienced in the natural, primordial attitude. The lifeworld is the immediate milieu of the individual social actor. The things that make life worthwhile — love, friendship, companionship, good conversations with friends and peer groups in informal settings, and spending quality time with family — are all part of the lifeworld, through which we are each known and recognized as a person, an individual, and a human being.

On the other hand, throughout my fieldwork, I felt like I observed something different from this. I was witnessing the encroachment of forms of administrative rationality or formal rationality, to use Max Weber’s terms, into life spaces (Weber 1978). Volunteering organized under administrative rationality is not situated in the lifeworld, as Husserl describes it. Instead, to rephrase Habermas (1987), this is the “colonization of the volunteering world.” By administrative rationality invading voluntarism, voluntarism cannot be synonymous with the lifeworld. As my ethnographic research shows, volunteers were originally seeking their own meaning in their lives. Satisfying their own meaning through volunteering for something was one of the crucial motivations for stepping into volunteering. However, people who were interested in satisfying their own interests through volunteering were strategically mobilized under the NPO Law in Japanese society. They were organized as volunteers under the name of NPOs, in which each had its own special area of social service within 17 designated areas, which include social welfare, community development, and international cooperation. The volunteers are expected to play a significant role in contributing to the existing society through activities in NPOs. Furthermore, participating in voluntary activities in NPOs, for example, is highly recommended as an ideal civic engagement style for supporting the New Public, or the state. Volunteering supervised under the NPO Law should be situated in the domain of formal rationality.

The colonization of the volunteering world involves a restatement of the Weberian thesis that the modern world based on formal rationality (determined by expectations of rational action pursuing efficiency and predictability) is triumphing over substantive rationality (determined by conscious value-oriented action) and coming to dominate areas that were formally defined by substantive rationality. It is a process by which rational actions in social and political life become predominant in the social activity of individuals, and formal rationality becomes predominant in the patterns of action, which are institutionalized in groups, organizations, and other collective behaviors. Weber characterizes this increasing rationality as an “iron cage” that limits individual freedom and activities:

No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise, or there will be a great rebirth of old ideas and ideals, or, if neither, mechanized petrification, embellished with a sort of convulsive self-importance. For of the last stage of this cultural development, it might well be truly said: “Specialist without spirit, sensualists without heart; this nullity imagines that it has obtained a level of civilization never before achieved.”

(Weber 1992: 182)

In my research context, under the iron cage, people are expected to institutionalize volunteer subjectivity in their bodies and minds as civic engagement for supporting the New Public, in other words the state. In the mobilization of voluntarism in contemporary Japan, all burdens fall on the grassroots volunteers, who are at a loss to suddenly be given such a large assignment. They are at their wit’s end trying to determine what they are expected to do. One volunteer, Ms. Takamiya, one of the original 13 pure volunteers who spontaneously joined this community-oriented continuing education project, told me:

I think what I am doing here is work. I know a lot is expected of us from the government. The pressure actually sometimes makes me feel lost — I don’t
Another day Ms. Tajima, whom I mentioned earlier in this paper as an invited volunteer, told me,

For the past two weeks, I have been sick. I was at home. During that time, I felt I was very settled. I even felt like that was the real me. Volunteering made me very tired. I was always thinking about planning new courses. I don’t know why I was so driven. Nevertheless, it was my daily life.

I will never forget the day that I saw a government official playing a computer game next to one of the volunteers who was negotiating with an instructor candidate. More able, active, flexible volunteers actually covered his job. Meanwhile, some of the volunteers left the organization as they became annoyed with this reality — the colonization of their volunteer consciousness by administrative rationality. They felt that this was not the volunteer activity they had imagined. These people chose not to be volunteers under the NPO structure.

Before concluding my argument, I would like to add an ethnographic observation of my old friend Ms. Suzuki. I met her when I started working as a reporter for a news service in the early 1990s after graduating from college. I used to speak with her because she was (and still is) active in a city northeast of Tokyo, where there were many migrant laborers from Bangladesh, Iran, Pakistan, and Peru working at small and medium-sized factories during the so-called bubble economy of the late 1980s and the early 1990s. Many foreign workers, most of whom were illegally staying in Japan, came to this city to perform hard jobs that Japanese people hated to do. When there was an on-the-job accident, the factory owners often refused compensation to these workers, as they were living in the country illegally. As a volunteer, Ms. Suzuki eagerly supported the migrant workers. She created her own network to help them by organizing a group to support migrant workers’ rights in Japan. As a reporter, I covered many labor accident cases in which these workers were involved. Ms. Suzuki stood up for anyone she believed was a victim; she also stood up against anyone, whether a government official or a business owner. Ms. Suzuki experienced the student movements of the late 1960s when she was a college student in Tokyo. While covering many cases, I saw that Ms. Suzuki’s actions originated from her experiences as a student activist.

It was in early January 2003 that I met Ms. Suzuki for the first time in more than five years. We talked about many things during our meeting at

a tiny Japanese-style bar; but, although I expected her to mention the ongoing NPO phenomenon in Japanese society because she continued to be active in social movements, during our three-hour conversation she never uttered the word “NPO” once. In the last few minutes of our meeting, I asked her directly what she thought about the current trend of NPOs. All she said was: “Some people might find that easier...” That was the only comment she offered. Despite its brevity, her remark was one of the most insightful comments I gathered for my project. She had continued to do what she wanted to do and what she needed to do in Japanese society as an independent, autonomous human being, while remaining deeply rooted in her community. She did not need the state’s recognition or control in an NPO to do her volunteer activities.

Volunteerism institutionalized under the NPO Law serves the state, in particular, the neoliberal state, which pursues small government with an emphasis on market rationality. Japan’s conservative government is taking advantage of the enthusiasm for volunteering to streamline the social system generated in the current framework of public administration. This is one reality of “volunteerism” in contemporary Japan. I would say, moreover, that this reality of “volunteerism” is not limited to Japanese society. I believe that it is also true in other countries promoting volunteerism under a conservative neoliberal policy.

Notes
1. This paper draws on a total of twenty months of fieldwork from September 2001 to April 2003, during which I worked as an unpaid staff-researcher at a nonprofit organization (NPO) promoting continuing education in downtown Tokyo. The NPO was incorporated under the Law to Promote Specified Nonprofit Activities in 1998. This research was partially supported by the Cornell University Graduate School and East Asia Program. I thank the secretariat staff members and volunteers of the NPO for their patience with and interest in my daily presence. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Chicago in November 2003. I thank Theodore C. Bestor, Davydd J. Greenwood, J. Victor Koschmann, Jeffrey Kingston, Guven Peter Witteveen, Deborah Weissman Ogawa, Gordon Mathews, editor of Asian Anthropology, and two anonymous referees, for their valuable comments on earlier drafts of this paper. Because of the confidential nature of materials the paper draws upon, no identifying information for some sources of data is provided. Except where otherwise indicated, all quotations are taken from my fieldnotes and all translations are mine.
2. NGOs (non-governmental organizations) are a subtype of Japanese NPOs. In essence, NGOs in Japan are categorized as NPOs that are active on international development issues.

3. I use this term ‘ individualization’ in line with Ulrich Beck’s definition (1994: 13). He writes, “ Individualization means, first, the disembonding and, second, the re-embedding of industrial society ways of life by new ones, in which ... individuals must produce, stage and cobble together their biographies themselves. Thus, the name ‘individualization’.”

4. Based on the recommendations from the Council, the Education Ministry formulated a bill to revise the Fundamental Law of Education and submitted it to the Diet. In the Regular Diet Session of 2003, however, the proposal was pending due to opinion conflicts among coalition ruling party members. The proposal would be discussed continuously, although Prime Minister Koizumi Jun’ichiro never mentioned a deadline, the Asahi Shimbun reported on July 31, 2003.

5. The Fundamental Law of Education was created in 1947. There were four attempts to revise the law prior to November 2001. The first one was in February 1956 by Education Minister Kiyose Ichiro. The second one was in August 1960 by Education Minister Araki Masuo. In August 1987, the Ad Hoc Council on Education was organized under Prime Minister Nakasone Yasuhiro. It was this council that actually formed the foundation of the present education reform policy. Under the administration of Prime Minister Obuchi Keizo and Mori Yoshiro in the late 1990s, the National Commission on Educational Reform, a private advisory body for the prime minister, urged the government to review the basic education law and adapt Japan’s educational agenda to better meet international needs. The council recommended that Japanese schools reiterate traditional values, reaffirming Japanese culture and community. One of the key points in the recommendation was that all school children perform community service, which was deemed coercive and compulsory. Education MinisterToyama then ordered the Central Council for Education to take into account the recommendations made by the National Commission on Education Reform. In fact, a current review of the law gained momentum after being recommended by the final report of the National Commission on Educational Reform in 2000.

6. Although at this point, July 2002 when this proposal was presented, the term New Public was not officially introduced, the concept can be seen in the content of the report. The term New Public first officially appeared in the 2003 report by the Central Council for Education.

7. Under the NPO Law, as of May 2004, there are 17 areas of permissible NPO activities: (1) promotion of health, medical treatment, or welfare, (2) promotion of social education, (3) promotion of community development, (4) promotion of science, culture, the arts, or sports, (5) conservation of the environment, (6) disaster relief, (7) promotion of community safety, (8) protection of human rights or promotion of peace, (9) international cooperation, (10) promotion of a society with equal gender participation, (11) sound nurturing of youth, (12) development of information technology, (13) promotion of science and technology, (14) promotion of economic activities, (15) development of vocational expertise or expansion of employment opportunities, (16) protection of consumers, and (17) administration of organizations that engage in the above activities or provide liaison, advice, or assistance in connection with the above activities.

References
The "Many Mouths" of Community: Gossip and Social Interaction among the Kelabit of Borneo

Matthew H. AMSTER

Abstract

This paper considers the role of gossip and social interaction among the Kelabit of Sarawak, Malaysia. Focusing on gossip in everyday life, the paper explores the tension between desires for individual privacy, concerns for group cohesion and, more broadly, desires to adopt a more modern style of living and social interaction. These tensions are vividly manifested in discourses about the problematic nature of gossip in the Kelabit community. Critical to this is a discussion of Kelabit styles of interpersonal interaction and conflict management, including the role of mediation. Offering a range of examples illustrating the social contexts of Kelabit gossip, this paper focuses on meta-discourses of gossip, contestations of community life, and gossip as a motivating force affecting decisions relating to choices of group affiliation.

Introduction

In a web-based discussion board of the "Online Kelabit Society" — a members-only, online forum established in 2002 by people from this

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